

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL MICHAEL X. GARRETT,
COMMANDER, 4TH BRIGADE, 25TH INFANTRY, MULTINATIONAL DIVISION-CENTRAL, VIA
TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 12:30 P.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2007

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COL. GARRETT: This is Colonel Garrett. Can you hear me?

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Yes, sir.
We've got you loud and clear. I'm Jack Holt with the bloggers roundtable. And
welcome to the bloggers roundtable today. Thank you for being with us. And
we've got Andrew Lubin with ON Point online, along with Grim from blackfive,
Bruce McQuain with QandO, and Jarred Fishman with The Air Force Pundit, and also
David Axe with Defense Technology.

So, sir, if you have an opening statement, we're ready to go.

COL. GARRETT: Well, I do. And thank you all very much for having me.
Believe it or not, this is my first teleconference with bloggers. And when
looking over the short descriptions of who's in attendance tonight, I'm
impressed by your varied professional backgrounds.

I'm actually pretty excited to conduct, you know, the questions; you
know, get your questions and answer them. I'm really looking forward to -- and
I have been since you've been here over the last 12 months. I've gotten a
little bit better and we've gotten a little bit better in terms of engaging the
media at, I think, really telling our story.

You know, to be honest, when Major Butler, my public affairs officer,
told me about this interview, I didn't quite know what to think. He explained
that blogs are a relatively large and growing media source and reach a large and
varying audience. So again, I thank you and I'm excited to talk to you.

Now, when we came here to Iraq, we came to build a secure Iraq, and,
through the course of the year, have fought battles against Sunni and Shi'a
extremists, like from Jaish al-Mahdi special groups to al Qaeda, and really
everything in between. You know, we've fought these battles alongside the Iraqi
security forces, and all of our efforts have been in support of the government
of Iraq.

You know, like most military units in our mission statement, it
categorizes our approach as full spectrum, which means that we're simultaneously
developing capabilities of the Iraqi security forces, the local government, the
basic services, building relationships with the local populace and tribal
leaders. And our brigade operates on the southern portion of MND-Center. We

operate along a sectarian fault line with mainly Sunnis to our north and Shi'a to our south.

You know, we have fought against al Qaeda, Jaish al-Islami, the JAI, Jaish al-Mahdi, and multiple separate groups of Sunni and Shi'a extremists. We assist in securing governance in the three provinces -- three of the four provinces in NMD-Center. We are responsible for Karbala, Babil, Najaf. We spend the majority of our time and effort in north Babil. In north Babil we patrol the main population centers, such as Musayyib, Iskandariyah, and many agricultural areas, such as Diara (ph), Muela (ph) and Jurpasuccor (ph). And we've been operating in this area for the last 11 months.

We conduct such a variety of operations that it's hard for me to explain each, but I'll try to just give you a little overview. We assist in infrastructure rebuilding, local business leader empowerment through our embedded provincial reconstruction team, EPRT, which is something that I really enjoy talking about because I think they've made a difference.

The EPRT develops local government and empowers communities through introducing USAID governance training, agricultural union assistance to improve production, small business training and assistance. We train and assist Iraqi police and Iraqi army through operations with our platoons and companies, and also have formalized training that establishes cohort-capable police units that have immediate positive impact on our communities. And, of course, we conduct kinetic operations such as raids, air assaults. We've conducted water-borne operations to capture and kill both Sunni and Shi'a insurgents and extremists.

So much has changed for us in the past couple of months. You know, the most recent operation we've completed that has had immediate impact on our area is Operation Marne Avalanche. This operation lasted about 30 days. We were the Multinational Division Center main effort.

We had priority in many of their resources. We were able to operate with increased intelligence assets and more helicopters to quickly move our paratroopers across the battlefield. We conducted numerous raids into known Sunni and Shi'a sanctuary areas.

The effect that we had is what was most important. You know, what happened in some of the most dangerous areas that we operated in is that the citizens were emboldened by our actions and began to come forward. The citizens, under the leadership of the sheikhs and mukhtars, began to cooperate with us, and more importantly, to contest the extremists in their neighborhoods.

You know, they were simply sick of the oppression of not only our operations, but of the operations against them by members of their own communities. We reacted to this by meeting with them, setting up. And at first it was handshake agreements, and now we've entered into, I think, our sixth or seventh contractual agreement with what is now widely known as our concerned citizens.

And so now we drive through areas like Jurpasuccor (ph), for instance, and wave to the local citizens as they are secure in their own neighborhoods and allowing us to make more progress. And it really is. This evening, in our update brief, the commander that's responsible for the Jurpasuccor (ph) area showed some pictures of a town gathering, if you will. And in the middle of this almost hovel- like village that had really been rife with violence over the

last nine, 10 months that we have been here -- I mean, something happened there every day -- today, in the middle of the town, there was a big -- (inaudible) -- with 20 to 30 sheikhs, hundreds of people, all celebrating, you know, their new-found security. And so it is amazing and it's kind of -- you know, if we can -- if I can take what's going on in Jurpasuccor (ph) and import that and encourage that kind of response and cooperation from the citizens in some of our other areas we will make progress. So I know that was a little bit long but I did want to give you a little bit of background, and right now I'm ready to answer any of your questions.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir. Colonel Michael Garrett, Commander 4th Brigade, Combat Team, 25th Infantry, for Multi Division or excuse me, Multi National Division Central in central Iraq. And Andrew Lubin, you are first online so why don't you get us started? Q Great. Colonel, this is Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today.

Sir, in the past couple weeks we've been fortunate to speak to your counterparts up at MND North Task Force -- (inaudible) -- you know, Marines out in Anbar, and unilaterally they described the conditions on the ground with the locals being good and getting better. But they've also pretty much described the GOI as irrelevant, incompetent and/or corrupt. With your area being in the Najaf and Karbala -- you know, the Muqtada al-Sadr stronghold -- how effective or how workable is the GOI in your area?

COL. GARRETT: I don't know that I would go as far as, you know, the guys out in Anbar in terms of my assessment of the government, and to be honest with you over the last maybe four or five months when we were under Multi National Division Baghdad I engaged the provincial level leaders, and I had a lot better feel for the provincial level of -- levels of government. And when MNDC came in the division assumed that for me so I have really been focusing over the last five months at the municipal and district levels of government. And what I will tell you there is that with the partnering that we're doing with the EPRT, they're getting better. Having said that, you know, many of the challenges that I deal with on a day-to-day basis in terms of my Iraqi security forces, both army and police, many of the issues that we deal with in terms of being able to provide services, you know, they all kind of get bottlenecked above the provincial level government and, you know, that's really one of the reasons for, you know, our operations over here. It's really to -- I think to buy some time, create some space so that the Iraqi security forces, army, police, and the government and really at all levels, you know, the provincial national level, you know, can gain some confidence and quite frankly get better.

But I am optimistic and some of these areas with what we're doing at the local levels. You know, I am optimistic when I, you know, now it's really listened to because I don't engage them directly anymore but the governor of Najaf, who I think has a vision for that province and has done a lot in terms of international encouraging -- soliciting international investment. You know, I think Najaf as a provincial governing body is really making some progress. I look at the Babil provincial council and although, you know, it's in some areas there it's functional but in some areas they are making progress. I mean, they have been able to execute a large portion of their budget. I mean, we're still challenged with, you know, looking outside of the provincial capital in terms of recognizing their responsibility for the other areas but there are some -- I think there are some positive signs there.

And then Karbala is just a challenge. You know, Karbala was a challenge when we got here and my sense is that Karbala will be a challenge, you know, well after we're gone. And then I mentioned before with the embedded provincial reconstruction teams, you know, this was a State Department initiative and, you know, I had my doubts, you know, early on. I really -- you know, I'm all about, you know, being able to show progress and I didn't need, quite frankly, another organization to come in with a lot of lofty goals and ideas. I needed to make an impact. I needed to show progress at some low levels and I will tell you that -- and it could have been luck of the draw but the team that we got in here has produced results in terms of, you know, they have executed several business training classes in the town halls of many of our communities. They have trained, you know, and when I say trained, you know, it's very rudimentary at this point, you know, but they're working with people to teach them how to manage or to prepare, execute, manage budgets at the provincial level. They're providing computer classes through USAID training programs, and USAID -- just having USAID in this part of Iraq is a big deal. They weren't here before we got here and now we have them teaching classes. So there are a lot of challenges at the national level but my focus here over the last five months has been at the municipal and district level, and as I said before I am cautiously optimistic in terms of where we're going right now and a lot of that has to do with the fact that, you know, security has increased, which has allowed us in some cases to focus more on those kinds of activities.

Q Well, thank you. If I could follow up, guys. Then do you see the GOI getting involved at all or just simply going to turn into one more part of the country where it's run provisionally or on a local level?

COL. GARRETT: I mean, I don't know. I mean, I think -- and again, you know, I don't have the energy or really the intellectual capacity at this point to spend a whole bunch of time thinking about what we're doing at the national level. But I do know what impacts me. I do know that, you know, not being able to efficiently fund -- resource the Iraqi security forces is a problem. I do know that, you know, working the national, you know, power grid and the coordination that is required there is a problem. I do know that water -- you know, working through, you know, water distribution is a problem and these are -- I mean, these are national level things that the government, you know, has to work through and the impact is on the population here.

Q Okay -- great. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: And Grim?

Q I'd like to ask you something a little bit different, mostly because you've already answered the question I'd intended to ask you. I would like to -- by the way, this is Grim of blackfive for the benefit of the transcribers -- I'd like to ask you about your operations in agricultural areas, which you mentioned briefly and earlier in the call. Would you talk -- we hear once in a while about the industrial sector in Iraq but I don't think I've spoken to anybody about how the agricultural sector is doing. Can you give some observations based on your operations on whether it's operating appropriately -- whether it seems to be recovering from the war -- that sort of thing?

COL. GARRETT: I mean, I can -- I'll give you my sense. We're in a fairly rural area and agriculture and agribusiness, you know, is I think the number one employer for most of, you know, this portion of Iraq. And our battle space is interesting in that, you know, we are on the Euphrates River Valley and just to the south and west of the Tigris, and as you fly for instance from

Baghdad through our battle space down to Najaf, I mean you really are flying over the Fertile Crescent. I mean, it really is amazing that, you know, in this very arid country the portion that we operate in looks like it could be somewhere in the Midwest of the United States.

My sense in looking back at historical documents, we still have not -- and historical documents and listening to some of the farmers -- we still are not at the levels, I don't think, in terms of production, you know, during the Saddam era. And I say that for two reasons: one, because every farmer that I talked to and the feedback that I get from our agricultural unions is that, you know, in some instances, we're able to farm -- you know, we're getting the, you know, two to three growing seasons a year -- but it's the distribution, you know, being able to distribute their products and produce throughout Iraq.

And then, you know, there are some challenges where some of the things that are being imported into Iraq, which is taking away some of the business from the farmers. But there are also, you know, good news stories. You know, I think in Najaf -- and I don't have this in front of me so I can't give you exact numbers, but I do know, or it was reported to me, that date production, cereal production in Najaf and in those areas was very high.

You know, so I guess to answer your question, I think the farmers are able to farm, you know, a similar amount of land that they did at the start of the war. I think our challenges now are the distribution of those products, perhaps some of the importing because based on the security, wherever you are, it may be easier to import some things than it is to move them from one province to another. I know I'm not answering your question directly, I'm giving you the best that I can off the top of my head.

You know, the other piece with agriculture, as I said before, you know, we're looking for opportunities to engage and identify local leaders. And before the concerned citizen program started, you know, in the areas where we had no real leadership, no governmental leadership, like Arab Jabour, Dayara, Muayla (sp) and a couple of other locations that were outside of our population centers, you know, the big organizations, the organizations that allowed us to bring people together were agricultural unions.

There was a time up in Arab Jabour, for instance, just south of Baghdad, where we started with, you know, 80, 90 folks. That organization grew into 2,500 folks. And with the introduction of the EPRT access to experts -- agricultural experts -- we've been able to do some education, we've had reachback, and really a capacity here on my staff that we didn't have before. So my sense is that we're making progress agriculturally, but just like everything else, I mean, there's a long way to go. I hope that answers your question.

Q That was an excellent answer. I had one quick follow-up. We spoke to, I think it was the -- oh, never mind; I'd have to look who it was that we spoke to. But he was telling us that they are receiving a lot of cheap imports in the industrial sector from Iran, which seems to be driving down the market somewhat. When you're talking about imports, are these also Iranian agricultural imports?

COL. GARRETT: I don't -- you know, I'm not familiar with where. I don't hear Iran tied to, you know, the agricultural imports. You know, for instance, I was having lunch with a sheik a while back, and I think it was the fruit that we talked about. We talked about oranges and he said that they came

from somewhere else. And I'm not exactly sure where, but he made the point that we can grow better, but we can't distribute them.

Q Thank you. I was just curious about to what degree dumping by Iran might be going on for, you know, reasons of influence. I appreciate you taking the time.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Bruce McQuain.

Q Hi, Colonel. Bruce McQuain with QandO.net.

Question about your kinetic operations. Are they mostly directed now at JAM versus Al-Qaeda, a good mix of both, or mostly Al-Qaeda?

COL. GARRETT: No. You know, we have -- this is a very interesting area. As I said, we are fighting and since day one we have been fighting Sunni extremists, to include Al-Qaeda, Jaish al- Islami, and a number of other organizations, along with Shi'a extremists, which includes JAM special groups.

And so what we have really tried to do here, for a number of reasons, is to take a balanced approach because of the people that we engage in our area of operation.

You know what's interesting? Our major population center in north Babil, it's a town called Iskandariyah. And in the municipal area, there's probably, you know, 200 (thousand) or 300,000 folks, but the population, demographically, is roughly, you know, 55, 60 percent Sunni and the other Shi'a. So it's a very mixed population. It's really the mixed population center in our area. If you move north of that, it's primarily Sunni, and as you move south, it's primarily Shi'a. And so are targeting has been at the Sunni targets, you know, during Marne Avalanche, it's fairly balanced, AQI targets along the Euphrates, Shi'a extremists south in the population centers. And I think we have been very balanced in terms of our approach.

Now what I will tell you, you know, with the momentum of the concerned citizenry, and the fact that in many places in our battle space right now, you have Sunni who were formerly aligned with JAI, that for the last, you know, two months have been fighting Al-Qaeda. And in securing their own areas, allowing us to get in and to do some other things. And so, you know, we have here lately, most of our -- many of our kinetic targets have been, you know, Shi'a extremists as opposed to Sunni based on, you know, the concerned citizen program and the work that we're doing in many of our Sunni areas.

Q Great. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Jarred Fishman.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for your time.

Could you talk a little bit to the interdiction of accelerants and/or JAM that could thwart RTC, those bad actors as far as on the leading edge of the Shi'a death squads?

COL. GARRETT: Yeah. You know, our mission here and in D.C., you know, really threefold: reduce accelerants of violence into Baghdad; you know, secure the population; and then to -- relative to the purpose of gaining space and time for ISF and to get better, and the government to gain more capacity. And you

know, certainly there are Iranian-influenced operations, you know, in terms of munitions, in terms of training. But in terms of the people that we specifically target, you know, there's not one person, you know, on my high-value target list, for instance, that is not Iraqi. I mean, I don't have an Iranian guy on my target list.

Now MND-Center, you know, has -- and one of the other provinces -- has up to 50 folks, you know, associated with Iran, we think, in the area. I think there were 20 that they were able to identify. But what I have in my battle space -- and the people who, both Sunni and Shi'a, that are fomenting violence into Baghdad, you know, are not necessarily Iranian. I don't have any, you know, IGRC targets. I don't have any, you know, Qods Force targets. Those aren't the guys that I'm going after.

The people that we are fighting and the things that we are interdicting are al Qaeda and JAM special groups and their violent activity into Baghdad, and also their influence on the population. And that's -- you know, it's really where we see ourselves here making the biggest difference. You know, we have -- you know, we are about 45 kilometers, 50 kilometers south of Baghdad. You know, right along the road that goes from Najaf through Karbala up to Baghdad, you know, the main MSRs. And so certainly there are a lot of -- there are a number of folks, both Shi'a and Sunni extremists, that we are dealing with. I hope that answers or gets at your question.

Q Great. Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: And David Axe.

Q Sir, this is David Axe with the Aviation Week Group.

You're quoted in The Washington Post discussing capacity building in the Iraqi government. And the exact quotation is something about giving fish versus learning to fish, and you tell your commander that you're still giving fish to the Iraqi people. Can you comment on that? Do you stand by that assessment, that we're still in sort of a donor kind of relationship?

COL. GARRETT: Yeah, I'm trying to -- you know, I'm trying to make sure that -- because I don't remember saying it that way -- but I think this is something that I said to General Lynch in terms of where we are right now. And you know, the comment got at, you know, there are a number of ways to build capacity in organizations. There are number of ways to fight a counterinsurgency. And one of the -- you know, one of the things that we're all dealing with, and really the leadership and at all levels, is how to allow the Iraqis to do for themselves, and where is that line of failure? Because we don't want them to fail. But they have to do in order to get better, in order to gain confidence in their own abilities.

And so, you know, what we are -- where we are today with our activities in some cases, because of the difficulty, you know, or perceived difficulty at my level, for the national-level government to support some of their security forces, we are providing not necessarily equipment -- we're not providing equipment for the Iraqi security forces, but we're pushing, you know, through our system their resourcing as opposed to the Iraqis pushing it through their system. And really what we're doing is we're kind of doing both at the same time.

You know, we've established -- and example is right now there are 850 IPs, Iraqi police, who are into their second month of training. And sometime here in October/September, we will have a battalion of emergency -- an emergency response battalion in North Babil, a tremendous capability for North Babil; you know, the force that we have trained, along with the Iraqi security forces, for the last two months, have expended a lot of organizational energy, and they're pretty doggone good. You know, are challenge right now is just to make sure that, you know, we get them properly equipped; we identify, you know, their headquarters; we identify and help provide their -- you know, the living conditions for their policemen, you know, et cetera. So that's what I meant by the comment.

You know, we are forcing -- forcing is not the right word -- but we are certainly pushing, for instance, some of the security forces, in a direction that we weren't going a couple of months ago. And that's because of this groundswell of activity, for instance, with our Sunni population. You know, we took a different approach in Jurf as- Sakhr. It was the sanctuary area for the enemy. But prior to the surge, I did not have the combat power here to really do anything but isolate the effects from that area into the population centers.

A result of the surge for me personally was the additional -- or the addition of a parachute battalion that we lost months before that allowed us to get into areas where the enemy operated with impunity and take that away from them. Sorry, I'm starting to ramble on a little bit, but, you know, in terms of what we're doing with the Iraqi security forces today and what they will have to be able to do here in a year or so, I think we're both moving in the same direction. I think our activities today, our building capacity, our building -- oh, what's the word I'm looking for? -- anyways, it'll come to me. Does that get at your question?

Q Yes, it does. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right. Colonel Michael Garrett, Commander of 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division of Multi-National Division-Central in and around Baghdad, thank you, sir, for being with us today. Do you have any closing comments for us? We're about out of time here. Anything you'd like to leave us with?

COL. GARRETT: No, I just appreciate the opportunity to talk to you this evening. You know, like I said, it's been interesting. We've been here, we are starting on our 12th month, and we have seen, you know, just a tremendous amount of change. And, you know, what's interesting, things happen, you know, very slowly, and very deliberately, and, you know, maybe not at the pace that we would like, but we are seeing, you know, positive -- or movement in a positive direction. And as I just said before, you know, I'm cautiously optimistic that, you know, we are making a difference in the area, you know, of Iraq that we're responsible before. So again, thank you very much for the opportunity.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir, and thanks for being with us, and we look forward to possibly speaking with you again, hopefully in a few weeks down the road -- kind of check-in and see how things are progressing. We appreciate it very much, sir. Thank you very much, Colonel Michael Garrett, with us, Commander of 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division. Thank you, sir.

COL. GARRETT: All right. Thank you. END.